

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on Raised Bill No 5485 regarding the Office of the Victim Advocate.

In October of 2007, my family and I became involved in our court system due to Domestic Violence.

Having dealt with different agencies within the criminal courts and civil courts since that time, I have come to realize change is needed. That is why I chose to speak today.

There are two parts to this bill from what I can see. Let me start with the second part first if I may.

The name change is very important. I was excited to come to speak today because I have dealt with a few different people both on the local level at the court house in Derby and the OVA in Hartford. As I was preparing what I wanted to say, I realized that although both places were referred to as the Victims Advocates, their affiliations and duties were vastly different.

In my local courthouse, Luz was the person who took this horrible situation I found myself and my family in and showed me a way out. She listened to what happened. She spoke with my daughter. She helped me find an amazing support group made up of kids just like my youngest who have been through the same things with a counselor who showed her the strength she had within her. She walked us through the process and got me in touch with people who could help us. Although she is a Victims Advocate, her office is not affiliated with the OVA I dealt with in Hartford.

I was referred to Merit Lajoie and the Office of the Victim Advocate due to the way the system had failed to adequately protect my family. There were issues with the judge that needed to be addressed. There was a lack of communication between the courts, the probation department and the program administrators who were overseeing my husband's probation. I needed to know what I could do to remedy my situation and hopefully make a change so no one else had to go through the same things. That is where Merit took over and worked with me to educate me of my rights within the system. She taught me that I had a right to be protected and that I had a right speak out. I have been here twice in the last month or so to testify at the Hearing on the reappointment of Judges and for the Legislative hearings on proposed law...something I never would have known about had I not been in contact with the OVA.

As you can see, the name change is important. In the first circumstance, Luz' job was to work within the court to help me through the process and direct me to agencies to help my children and myself. In the second, Merits job is to be sure that the system worked for me...that everyone worked together for the good of the victim...that the prosecutors, judges and agencies involved all did their part.

In the courtroom, everyone seems so concerned with the rights of the criminal...the OVA is concerned with the rights of the VICTIM.

It is for this reason as well that the OVA needs to remain an independent agency not comprised mainly of the agency's which may be in question. It is definitely important to have the input of the judicial branch, prosecutors, law enforcement, etc. Working together is the only way to effect positive changes. However, the OVA is about the Victim and what the Victim experiences and it seems that the Victim's input is overshadowed by all rest.

The Victim...the one who goes through the system...the one who experiences everything from the crime...to the arrest...to the multiple court hearings and all the people involved in those hearings...whether those experiences are good or bad...are the ones who can best effect change.

We can tell you what it feels like to stand next to the person who hurt you and tell your story over and over again and feel as if it falls on deaf ears.

We can tell you what it feels like to be disappointed in a system that doesn't seem to protect them or thrilled by a system where everything worked just right.

By keeping the OVA free from agency ties, it insures that our stories will be heard and our rights will be upheld and positive change will occur.

I have worked in retails for a number of years. I love when a customer tells me how great the service we provided is.

I love the complaints more.

Although I may not be able to rewind time and do something to fix that issue, it gives me the opportunity to make changes that will prevent the same mistake from happening again.

That's what this is all about...learning from what we do right *and* from what we do wrong.

Thank you

Submitted 3-19-10 by

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